

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 EB-08 COME-00 PA-02 USIA-15 /038 W
-----090310 080252Z /66

R 080209Z DEC 77
FM AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3581
INFO ALL EC CAPITALS

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USEEC

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: EEC, ECSM
SUBJECT: EC SYMPOSIUM ON CONSUMER INFORMATION: RESULTS

1. THE EC COMMISSION AND THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUVAIN JOINTLY SPONSORED A SYMPOSIUM ON CONSUMER INFORMATION NOVEMBER 23-25 IN BRUSSELS. CONSUMER INFORMATION IS INCLUDED IN THE LIST OF RIGHTS DETAILED IN PRELIMINARY PROGRAM ON CONSUMER INFORMATION AND PROTECTION ADOPTED IN 1975. THE MORE THAN 300 PARTICIPANTS REPRESENTED CONSUMER ORGANIZATIONS, PUBLIC AUTHORITIES, BUSINESS, THE PRESS AND RESEARCH GROUPS FROM ALL NINE MEMBER STATES, SPAIN, PORTUGAL, THE UNITED STATES, SWITZERLAND, TURKEY AND CANADA. THE GOAL OF THE SYMPOSIUM WAS TO DEFINE THE PROBLEMS OF CONSUMER INFORMATION, TO ESTABLISH AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR FUTURE DISCUSSIONS, AND TO FIND THE COMMON DENOMINATOR FOR FUTURE WORK INVOLVING THE CONSUMER, BUSINESS AND GOVERNMENT.

2. RICHARD BURKE, EC COMMISSIONER WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONSUMER AFFAIRS, OPENED THE MEETING. HE STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE THAT THE COMMISSION PLACED ON THE ROLE OF INFORMATION, CALLING IT "THE VERY HEART OF ANY EFFECTIVE CONSUMER PROTECTION POLICY." BURKE THEN
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CATALOGUED COMMUNITY ACTION IN THIS FIELD, TWO PROPOSALS ON LABELLING AND PACKAGING OF FOODSTUFFS, AND UNIT PRICING WHICH ARE AWAITING EC COUNCIL APPROVAL, STUDIES ON LABELLING, CONSUMER SURVEYS, AND BIBLIOGRAPHIES OF CONSUMER GROUPS. HE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT "THE SUM TOTAL OF THE MEASURES TAKEN SO FAR IS CONSIDERABLY SHORT OF OUR AGREED OBJECTIVES" BUT STRESSED THAT THE RATE OF

PROGRESS WAS INCREASING.

3. THE MEETING THEN DIVIDED INTO FOUR WORKSHOPS DEALING WITH SPECIFIC PROBLEMS OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF CONSUMER INFORMATION. GROUP 1 EXAMINED CONSUMER INFORMATION BY ADVERTISING, LABELLING AND TRADE PRACTICES. GROUP 2 DEALT WITH CONSUMER INFORMATION BY ENTERPRISES DURING AND AFTER PURCHASE, ESPECIALLY EXAMINING DISCLOSURE REQUIREMENTS, STANDARD CONTRACTS, WARRANTIES AND AFTER-SALES SERVICE AND CORPORATE DEPARTMENTS FOR CONSUMER AFFAIRS. GROUP 3 COVERED CONSUMER ORGANIZATIONS, SPECIFICALLY LOOKING AT COMPARATIVE TESTING, AND THE MEDIA'S ROLE. GROUP 4 FOCUSED ON PUBLIC AUTHORITIES. THE GROUPS WERE LED BY EXPERTS AND COVERED THE LEGAL ASPECTS, COMPARED THE VARIOUS PRACTICES IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES AND MADE SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS AS TO HOW THE COMMUNITY COULD IMPROVE ITS LAWS.

4. THE CONCLUSIONS OF THE GROUP WERE DISCUSSED IN PLENARY SESSION AND SUMMED UP BY MICHEL CARPENTIER, HEAD OF THE COMMISSION'S ENVIRONMENT AND CONSUMER PROTECTION SERVICE. THE THREE MAJOR ASSUMPTIONS AGREED UPON BY THE SYMPOSIUM WERE: THE NEEDS OF THE CONSUMER MUST BE BETTER UNDERSTOOD, ACTION SHOULD BE TAKEN TO RESPOND TO THESE NEEDS, AND THERE IS A CONTINUING NEED FOR CONSUMER EDUCATION. SPECIFICALLY THE GROUP CONCLUDED THAT:

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-- LABELLING SHOULD BE LIMITED TO A STRICTLY INFORMATIVE ROLE PRECLUDING ANY ADVERTISING OR ATTESTATION OF QUALITY;
-- LEGAL OBSTACLES WHICH PRECLUDE GREATER ACCESS TO THE MEDIA BY CONSUMER ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD BE REMOVED;
-- RESTRICTIONS ON THE SUBJECTIVE NATURE OF ADVERTISING, STIFFER REQUIREMENTS FOR INFORMATIVE ADVERTISING, AND EXTENSION OF CONCEPTS OF DECEPTIVE AND UNFAIR COMMERCIAL PRACTICES SHOULD BE IMPLEMENTED;
-- MEASURES BANNING COMPARATIVE ADVERTISING SHOULD BE REMOVED OR IMPLEMENTED WITH GREATER FLEXIBILITY;
-- LOCAL CONSUMER INFORMATION CENTERS SHOULD BE DEVELOPED;
-- PUBLIC SERVICES AND DEPARTMENTS SHOULD EXPAND AND STRENGTHEN THEIR INFORMATIVE ROLE.

5. THE SPEAKERS AND PARTICIPANTS CONSISTENTLY CRITICIZED THE LACK OF HARMONIZATION AMONG MEMBER STATES REGARDING THE LEGAL ASPECTS OF CONSUMER INFORMATION. FRANCE, ITALY, BELGIUM AND LUXEMBOURG ALL HAVE LAWS WHICH EFFECTIVELY PRECLUDE COMPARATIVE ADVERTISING AND ARE BASED ON STATUTES DATING FROM THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY. LABELLING LAWS SHOW WIDE VARIANCES AND DISCLOSURE REQUIREMENTS ARE DE-

SIGNED TO FIT THE NEEDS OF BUSINESS RATHER THAN THE
CONSUMER. THE COMMISSION IS WORKING ON DIRECTIVES REGARD-
ING CREDIT, MISLEADING ADVERTISING AND LABELLING, BUT IT
MAY BE TWO YEARS OR LONGER BEFORE THEY CAN BE IMPLEMENTED.
THE GENERAL ATTITUDE OF ALL THE PARTICIPANTS, GOVERNMENT,

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BUSINESS, TRADE UNIONS AND CONSUMER ORGANIZATIONS WAS TO
FOCUS INCREASED EFFORTS IN THIS AREA AND MOVE AS QUICKLY
AS POSSIBLE TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION.

6. DOCUMENTS FROM THE SYMPOSIUM ARE BEING POUCHED TO
E/CAC. MORRIS

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